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Rockets rise over Three Oaks

By MARY MARGOL
H-P New Buffalo Correspondent

THREE OAKS — With a puff of smoke, rockets lifted into the air Saturday as members of Michigan's Tripoli unit of advanced non-professional rocket clubs took part in the Great Lakes launch near Three Oaks.

Group members came from eastern Ohio, Ann Arbor, Detroit and Elkhart, Ind., to participate in the launch that was accompanied Saturday by near ideal weather. Blue skies and puffy white clouds formed a good backdrop for the rockets that left smoke plumes reminiscent of space shuttle launches. Many of the rockets drifted to the ground on nylon, fluorescent orange parachutes.

Tripoli member Roy Simpson, of Elkhart, said the slight 6 mph winds permitted flights of up to 3,500 and 5,000 feet.

The advanced high-power rockets constructed of cardboard tubing with composite fins and noses. Rocket engines are made of the same composite material used in the space shuttle launches.

Simpson said, "Engines that cost from $10 to $2,500 are used on our launches. These engines produce more power, speed and altitude than the common Estes engines that many of us started out with as youngsters."

The rockets are retrieved after parachutes eject from the nose.

The Tripoli rocket club is a national organization that has about 1,500 members.

The launch at Three Oaks drew some 100 participants and enthusiasts Saturday and was to continue today. It was arranged by Dave McVeigh, owner of Red Arrow Hobbies Rockets and Novelties.

"It's a hobby, a sport and avocation, all in one," said Simpson an executive from an automobile glass supplier in Elkhart and a private pilot.

Mary Margol photo

ROCKET INSPECTION: Richard Rau (left), Ann Arbor, and Robert Robinson, Elkhart, Ind., examine a rocket before flight.

"The organization was started in 1984 by professional people who are involved in the space industry, actually professional rocketry experts." He continued, "Members of our group come from a full spectrum of educational and economic backgrounds, they all have a common interest in rocketry and leave their backgrounds at home."

This launch was one of the 50 to 60 sponsored annually by the organization. The largest launches take place in the western states — Colorado, California, Montana where Federal Aviation Administration waivers for rocket flights have ceilings of up to 50,000 feet. The larger tracts of land in the west allow for the higher altitudes, which result in a larger rocket recovery area.

"Safety is the first concern of the organization, we follow the letter of the law. We train with safety first and foremost in our minds," said Simpson. Rocket engines for advanced rocketry can only be purchased by those individuals who are card carrying members of organizations such as Tripoli or who are professional rocketeers, he said.

Simpson says, "We've never had a mishap at any of our launches in the past six years. We have a good time, there is a lot of camaraderie, some joking around. But our people are serious and have a great deal of pride in what they are doing. We're always interested in getting invited back, so we follow the rules."